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Stress and Work/Life Balance

Insights for Managers

David Newth

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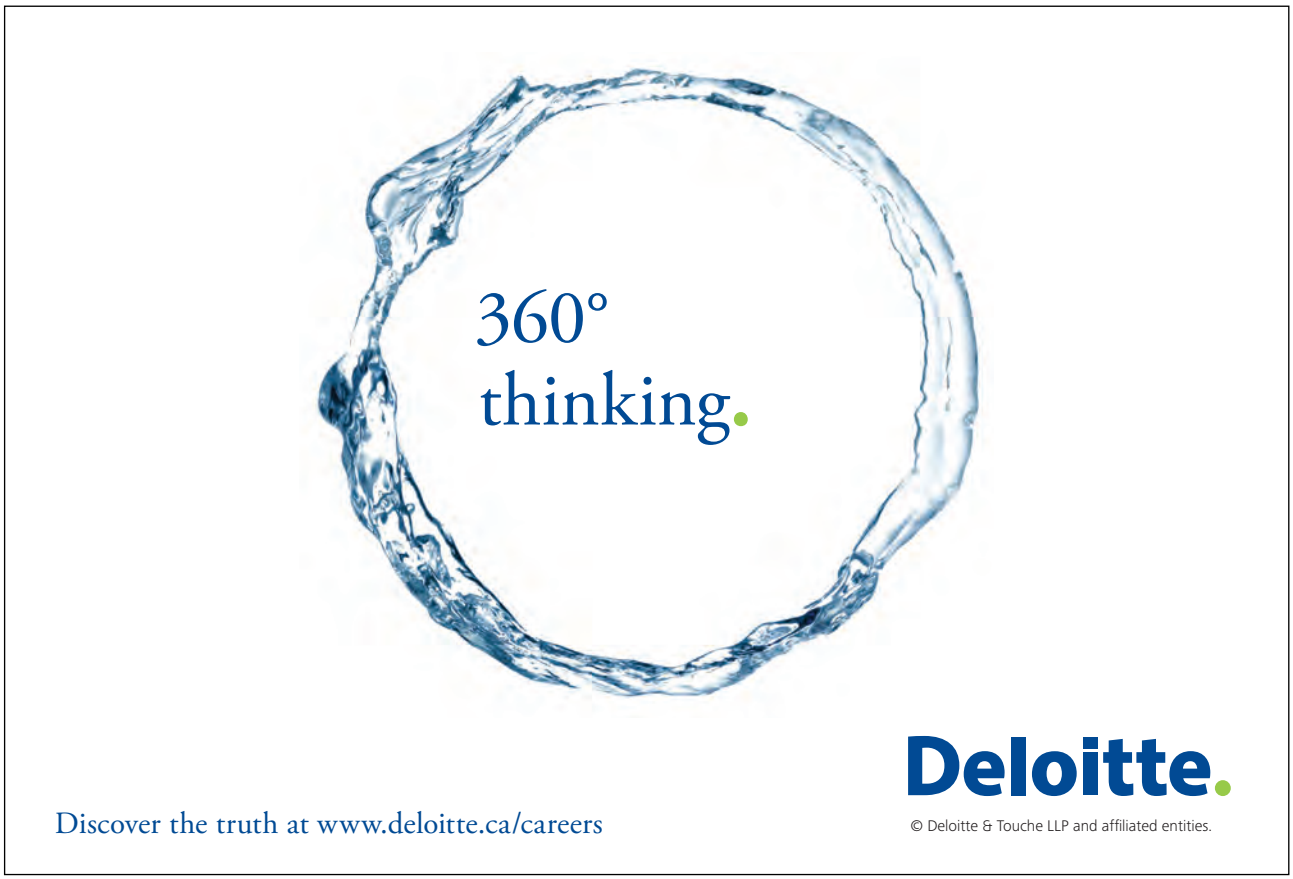
Contents

	Preface	**8**
1	**Part I: Introduction**	
	Stress is different	**9**
1.1	Everybody is unique	9
1.2	Polar opposites	9
1.3	Who will admit to stress?	9
1.4	The gender gap	10
2	**Why is stress increasing?**	**11**
2.1	Might it all be the fault of others?	11
2.2	Self recognition and honesty	12
3	**Revealing definitions**	**13**
3.1	Some myths	14
4	**Common signs of stress**	**15**
4.1	The physiology of stress (The 'fight or flight' syndrome)	16



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Click on the ad to read more

5.1	Gauging how you are coping	17
5.2	Burnout	18
5.3	Work-related stressors: self assessment	19
6	**Part II: Introduction**	
	Coping skills strategy	**21**
6.1	Time to spare? Seems unlikely but ….	22
6.2	Time management menu	23
6.3	Tyranny of a 'to do' list	24
6.4	Delegation	24
7	**Assertion as an antidote to stress**	**26**
7.1	Be assertive with yourself	26
7.2	A revealing exercise	26
7.3	The noisy library challenge	27
7.4	Just say 'No'!	28
7.5	Assertion miscellany	30
8	**Work/life balance**	**31**
8.1	Experiment with changes	31
8.2	'Me' time	33

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8.3	Interests outside work	33
8.4	The impact of mood at home	34
8.5	Early hour waking	34
9	**Cognitive skills**	**36**
9.1	Irrational beliefs (non-religious)	36
9.2	Approval	36
9.3	'Fair and just'	37
9.4	Perfection	37
9.5	Perception and choice	38
9.6	Challenging negative thinking	40
9.7	Overcoming anxiety	41
9.8	Talk support	42
9.9	Self-affirming questions and slogans	43
10	**Part III: Introduction**	
	The influence of the manager	**44**
10.1	Middle managers are the meat	44
10.2	Duty of care – just another initiative?	45
10.3	Manager's duty of care check list	46
10.4	Detecting possible signs of stress in others	47
10.5	How to deal with George	49

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10.6	Basic counselling skills for managers	49
10.7	If in doubt……Do!	51
10.8	Influence of type 'A' personality	51
10.9	Am I a stress spreader?	53
10.10	Emotional intelligence	54
11	**Conclusion**	**55**

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Preface

This book is for managers who experience unhelpful feelings of stress at work or home, regularly or occasionally. It is written in late 2011 at a time of escalating financial restraint and uncertainty when the associated pressures for managers is at an all-time high. Formal stress management training has not escaped the cuts, so the need to take self-responsibility in learning about the subject has never been greater. Very little of it can be termed an exact science, but I hope that you will find it constructive and that it will enable you to compile a strategy suited to your circumstances. I suggest you are selective and seek out that which seems particularly relevant to you and those you manage.

I have avoided compiling a conventional text book, instead using a more informal approach based around my experience of what was most thought-provoking and helpful for the few thousand managers and staff I have met over the past twenty years when leading training workshops. I have also drawn conclusions from conducting many 'back-on-track' coaching sessions with individuals who have suffered or been close to burnout.

My business is based entirely around the control of stress, mostly for managers. Some may think this a rather depressing undertaking but it is revealing for its variety and rewarding for its opportunity to inform and guide those who can benefit from it. For some it has been life-changing, regardless of whether they are employed in large or small, private or public organizations and whatever their situation away from work.

My aim is to encourage managers to understand and consider not only their own stress but also the stress of those around them and especially those who report to them and for whom they therefore have a duty of care. Human nature dictates that most readers will find themselves relating much of what they read primarily to themselves, but please encompass your team in your thinking. Part 1 is essential background to confirm what is typical and normal and to assure readers that what they might experience from time to time is not unique to them. Also, it should help you decide where you and others match up to the norm.

In Part 2 there are tips and techniques for dealing with stress in yourself (and by implication others as well) and Part 3 addresses your role as manager, the responsibilities it carries and how best to fulfil them. The underlying messages throughout the book will provide potential for managers to improve or master better control of their lives and the potential to become more effective at work and more content at home. For some it may, in parts, seem idealistic, perhaps even unrealistic, but I believe you will find much to consider and I would urge you to experiment with some changes, even if they are small.

I am grateful to those who were my managers during my early career, a few very good, most mediocre and some very poor. From all of them I observed and absorbed much in my progression from clerk to boardroom. I also acknowledge the skill and encouragement of the many who subsequently provided the professional training I required to create and establish The Millfield Consultancy and the service it provides.

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1 Part I: Introduction Stress is different

The subject of stress is fundamentally different from all other training topics provided by employers. It can be highly personal, it is not just about work and it centres on feelings more than facts, although this is not always obvious. Furthermore, the many tried and tested techniques for keeping stress at bay are only a menu of suggestions or possibilities and require individual choice to suit differing personalities and individual circumstances. There is some common ground for many but there is no 'one cap fits all' solution.

1.1 Everybody is unique

I have no wish for this book to be seen as 'touchy feely'. Quite the reverse is intended and I hope as you read on you will conclude that it is down to earth and relates to the realities of everyday life for you and your team and others in your life away from work. However, it is not a fanciful idea that some key aspects of our vulnerability to stress will be rooted in how we were regarded and treated from the moment we were born. Like it or not, we are largely stuck with that and with its variety of possible consequences, which might be positive or negative. Beware that as we get older our perception of any negatives in our upbringing may become exaggerated and the positives discounted. This self-deception can become entrenched and is unhelpful. More about this and how best the negatives can be addressed will be covered later.

1.2 Polar opposites

Most gurus in the field of people management education suggest that in general terms it is desirable to treat everyone in your team the same. On the face of it this seems good practice but I support the idea only to the point that a manager should be fair and consistent in the way each individual is treated. Consider the extreme contrasts between person A, who has been dealt a very difficult hand of cards in life and carries many burdens and yet is always cheerful and positive, and person B, who has no such worries and yet is always moaning and negative. Consciously or not, their manager is likely to treat them differently. I'd go further and suggest that your relationship with each member of your team is unique. Of course Person B's personality and negative attitude makes them more vulnerable to stress and their outlook on life is likely to affect others in the team adversely.

1.3 Who will admit to stress?

In a department of, say, twenty or more staff there are likely to be four categories in the matter of self recognition or admission to suffering from stress.

a) The person who knows they are stressed but tries to hide it and is reluctant to admit it. By burying it they run the risk of it escalating.
b) The one who knows they are stressed, is facing up to it and is resolved to do something about it. Brave in some circumstances, perhaps, but a sensible step to protect their physical and mental health.

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c) The one who is stressed but genuinely does not recognize it even though it is obvious to colleagues. This seems strange, but I've met many of them and will explain more later.
d) The person who is not really stressed but would like those around them to think they are. A pain to colleagues and difficult to manage!

1.4 The gender gap

This is not a sexist observation but a simple fact. A typical man is much less likely than a typical woman to face up to being stressed and therefore is less likely to do anything about it. Consequently most women (not all) are better at coping with it. I've already suggested that facts invariably seem the trigger for stress but also hinted that it is the feelings they provoke which really matter and need addressing. How often will you hear two men say, 'Let's go down to the pub to discuss our feelings'?

Most women are better at dealing with their stress because they are likely to talk about it to a friend, colleague or member of their family. Of course they are also invariably better at multi tasking due mainly to the neurological wiring between compartments of their brain. This is different from a man's, which allows them to use more parts of their brain concurrently. How annoying it can be for a man when his partner is doing a crossword, listening to a radio play and preparing a meal, all with equal attention, and his focus is confined to fixing a new fuse in the mixer plug!

It is no surprise either that at my workshops when attendance is based on self-selection, most places are taken by women. In an organization employing a roughly equal number of each sex there will typically be ten women attending and two men. It is all the more frustrating when a man attending a mandatory workshop reports afterwards that he didn't want to attend but was very glad he did. So the macho issue cannot be ignored and managers need to take account of it, perhaps to the extent of keeping a closer eye on the men than the women in their team.

A word of warning here for any manager who is one of the relatively few who has no personal experience of stress and 'does not believe in it'. My experience suggests that they find it hard not to show their antipathy towards those who might need their support and help and in so doing make the situation worse for the unfortunate individual. The ability to have the imagination to put yourself in the shoes of others is an invaluable asset for an effective people manager.

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2 Why is stress increasing?

Modern day stress seems to be more widespread than ever and many of the reasons are obvious, such as more work by less people, financial uncertainty, job insecurity, constant performance measurement, the increasing requirement for instant information or response, impossible targets, juggling work/home priorities, the downsides of cyberspace technology, the depressing state of affairs in many parts of the world and much more besides.

Another reason sometimes suggested is that, thanks to far reaching research, so much more is known about the subject now and some will suggest that this encourages unhealthy circumspection. I take the point but suggest it actually underlines the need to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject rather than a superficial one.

2.1 Might it all be the fault of others?

Ask a group of managers or staff to volunteer what sort of everyday occurrence has them feeling uptight and the variety is always striking.

- Being set unrealistic deadlines
- The state of my teenager's bedroom
- People not calling me back
- 300 e-mails waiting for me after two days away
- My boss ignoring me
- The traffic jams on my way to work
- Colleagues' idle chatter when we are all so busy
- Old ladies holding everyone up at the check-out
- Multi choice telephone answering systems
- People who don't seem to care
- My next door neighbour's cat
- Pointless meetings which go on for ever

Then ask them to identify a common link and someone will eventually volunteer that they are all directly or indirectly about other people. I will encourage them to consider it is simply called 'life', is virtually inevitable and by and large you can do very little about changing it. This sometimes draws heated accusations of complacency or defeatism but significantly, such hostility will come primarily from those who have already shown themselves to be the more stressed members of the group. One of the key skills in coping with would-be stressors is to identify and learn to tolerate those things you cannot change.

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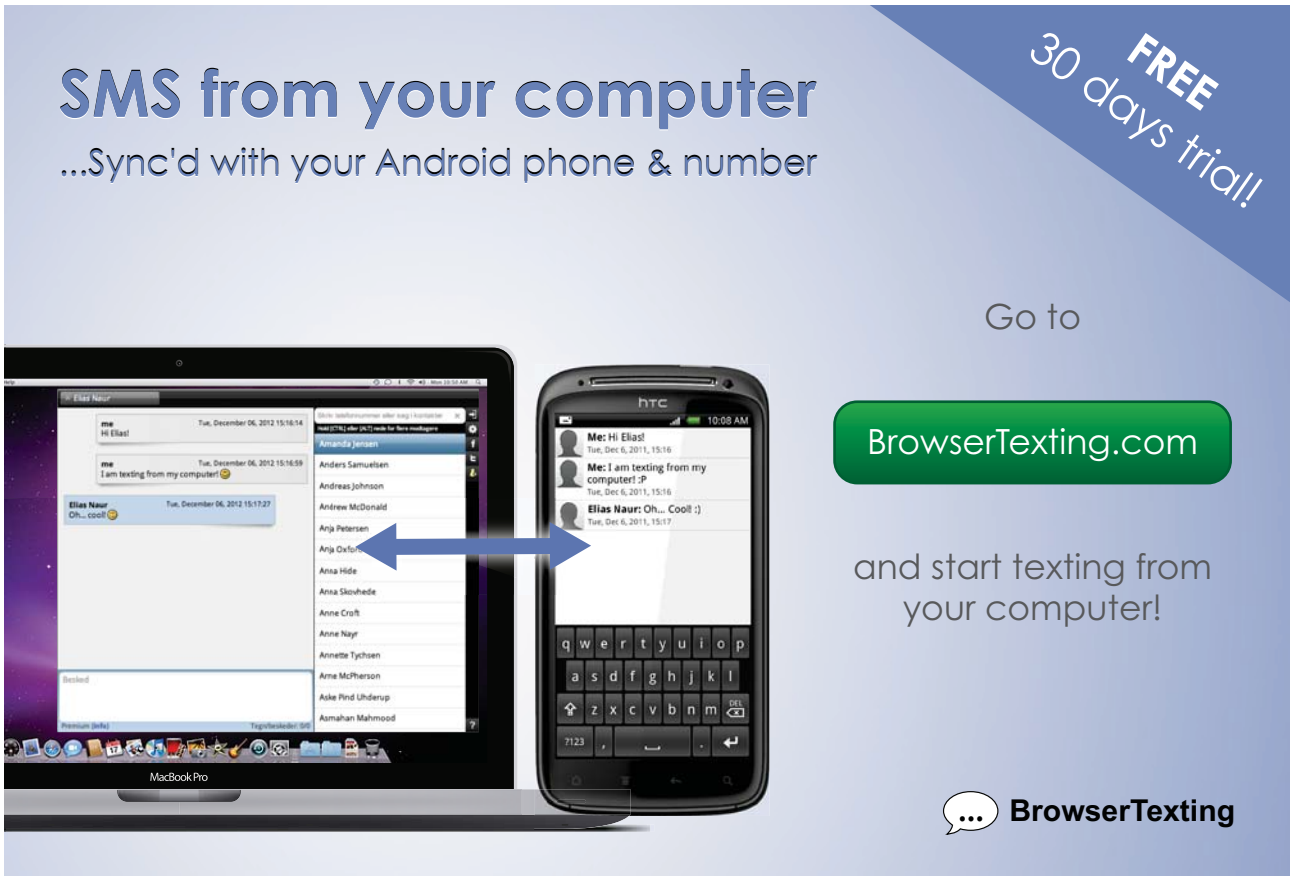
2.2 Self recognition and honesty

Given the premise that we have choice in the extent to which we allow everyday frustrations and setbacks to affect our mood, it follows that our perceptions of such matters are vital and of course these can vary alarmingly from day to day, influenced by what else has been going on at work, home, or even the journey between the two. A challenging situation today may give us a buzz, whereas the identical situation tomorrow might be a burden. The dual recognition that (a) we have choice of perception and (b) that we can often be our own worst enemy are not easy to remember when we are having a bad day. If we are too absorbed by the negatives, we become blinkered and find it hard to see the wood from the trees. Self-flagellation!



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3 Revealing definitions

Asking delegates to consider and write down their own personal definition of stress beginning with the words "For me stress is…" and then reading it out to the group brings home the extraordinary variety of perspectives and demonstrates to managers the dangers of assuming uniformity of thought amongst their staff. Here is a small representative selection from hundreds:

For me stress is being made to feel insignificant
For me stress is trying to please everyone all the time
For me stress is a horrible tight feeling in my chest
For me stress is having no 'me time'
For me stress is fear of failure
For me stress is not being me any more
For me stress is when things which are not important seem very important and I lose sight of that which is far more important

Academics and researchers inevitably come up with rather lengthy definitions such as
Stress is a reaction to excessive pressure or demand (real or perceived) which seems difficult or impossible to manage. This carries the clear implication of our choice both of the truth of the cause of the stress and our ability to cope with it. When the heat is on we seldom recognise that we have options of perception, attitude or action.

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I prefer to keep my definition short and simple*: 'A feeling of not being in control'*.

It may not sit comfortably with all readers, but we cannot properly address this complex subject without accepting that it is largely about how we feel. It is completely understandable that it might be some unpalatable facts or crippling circumstances which are to the fore in our mind and can so easily overwhelm us. To adjust our perceptions and stay in control of our feelings at such times is certainly challenging but it can be achieved and when successful, even partially, we feel great.

3.1 Some myths

It is a common misconception that some level of stress is a good thing but you will find very few academics supporting this view. It is a grey area because of the semantics of the words we use. We all benefit at times from experiencing pressure in our lives, but as long as we feel broadly in control of it, then it is not stress we are experiencing. Pressure can be invaluable in helping us to concentrate and to focus. Some of the physiological consequences of stress can be valuable when they are anticipated. A professional firefighter entering a burning building might be experiencing a thrust of extra physical strength and consciousness, as might a sprinter pushing off the blocks. But they understand this short-lived advantage, feel in control of it and are able to turn it to their advantage.

Some might feel that stress is a form of illness. Perhaps this is not too surprising as we might refer to 'Richard being off with stress' and sick notes might unhelpfully include the word when the hard-pressed GP is in a hurry (perhaps stressed!) and has no time to be less sweeping in the diagnosis. The view of some that stress is a sign of mental weakness is far too sweeping and usually untrue and often unfair.

Stress in itself is not an illness but it can readily be the trigger for some physical health problem. There is, however, a notable exception in cases of prolonged burnout which might result in the mental stability of the individual being impaired permanently. Conversely, some of the most relaxed individuals I have met have told me they were only that way as a result of their experience of burnout and their subsequent resolve to change their outlook on life: 'I'm never going there again'

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4 Common signs of stress

Physical signs

- palpitations – throbbing heart
- pain and tightness in the chest
- indigestion
- breathlessness
- nausea
- muscle twitches
- tiredness
- headache, vague aches or pains
- skin irritation or rashes, susceptibility to allergies
- clenched fists or jaw
- feeling faint
- frequent colds, flu or other infections
- recurrence of previous illnesses
- constipation or diarrhoea
- rapid weight gain or loss
- alteration of the menstrual pattern in women

Emotional signs

- swings in mood
- increased worrying
- feeling tense
- drained, no enthusiasm
- feeling angry, guilty
- cynical
- feeling nervous, apprehensive, anxious
- feelings of helplessness
- loss of confidence and self-esteem
- lack of concentration, withdrawal into day-dreams

Behavioural signs

- accident-prone
- poor work
- increased dependence on nicotine, alcohol or drugs
- overeating or loss of appetite
- change in sleep pattern, difficulty in getting to sleep and waking tired
- loss of interest in sex

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- impaired speech
- withdrawal from supportive relationships
- irritability
- taking work home more
- too busy to relax
- not looking after oneself
- speeding up – talking, walking, eating, drinking

4.1 The physiology of stress (The 'fight or flight' syndrome)

This is best understood when recognized as a set of involuntary, mostly physical reactions experienced when we perceive our wellbeing is threatened. The nature of the threat may be physical or emotional. It could be a hooded mugger confronting us with a knife, our boss giving us unfair criticism, a flaring row with a loved one, or 'just one of those days'.

The brain registers a threat to our comfort zone, which triggers adrenalin, which activates physical changes. The syndrome has existed as a survival mechanism since pre-human times and is still a fundamental animal reaction, virtually unaltered through the ages. Our bodies are preparing for a fight or flight, which is useful for the mugger scenario, but unhelpful if you are in your boss's office with your arms and legs primed for action!

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The main changes are:

- The heart is the engine, speeding up to drive oxygen enriched blood quickly to where it is needed – mostly the muscles of our arms and legs, which tense ready for action.
- We breathe more heavily to take in the extra oxygen required.
- We sweat, in anticipation of expending extra energy, keeping our muscles from overheating.
- The digestive processes slow, maybe stop, as hormones are diverted for more urgent use elsewhere.
- We may need to relieve ourselves of any 'excess load'.
- The stomach signals a reluctance to swallow, even saliva, so our mouth dries.
- Our senses, especially our sight (pupils dilate), are heightened.

Many of these reactions are self-evident and immediate. What is not felt is the increased level of cortisol in the blood. Often referred to as the 'stress hormone', it is an anti-inflammatory agent, useful if you've been beaten up, but which, if over-produced over time, suppresses our immune system, making us more susceptible to illness or infection.

5.1 Gauging how you are coping

If you aspire to feel in control of your life and reasonably stress-free most of the time, then you need some means of keeping track of how you are doing. I've already suggested that it is common for people suffering from stress to be seemingly blind to it, although it may be obvious to others. The more we kid ourselves we are OK, the less likely we are to address it and the worse it is likely to become. If we are experiencing some of the symptoms already listed with regular or increasing frequency, it is clear something is wrong. The physical signs are difficult to miss or ignore but the mental and behavioural signs are more illusive.

A shamelessly contrived but useful way to decide 'where you are at' is to imagine you are in a building with four rooms, each with different ceiling heights.

The 'dandy' room. The ceiling here is low enough for you simply to raise your arm to touch it with the flat of your hand. You feel you are in control of your life, on top of any challenges, and by and large everything is fine and dandy.

The 'dodgy' room. This ceiling is rather higher but you can just touch it with your fingertips when you are right up on your toes. You are not coping too well with the pressures in your life and are feeling the strain, at least most days.

The 'dire' room. To touch this ceiling you need to jump with all the energy you can muster. Sometimes you just scrape it, but increasingly you miss. You are not in control of your life and every day seems more difficult than the last.

The 'disaster' room. The ceiling here is so high you can't bring yourself to even look at it and you sink to the floor with burnout.

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I make no apology to any reader who may view this as too simplistic or too gimmicky an approach to self-assessment. Ask anyone who has experienced the 'dire' or 'disaster' areas and they will have no argument with the words used. Many of us have a natural reluctance to self-analyze particularly, if it involves complexity. This broad-brush method is a palatable way of stopping to think in general terms about how we are coping and, as we shall see in part 3, it is a useful guide for assessing members of your team and highlighting those who may be in need of your support.

In deciding which room you inhabit it is unhelpful to think short term. If most of the time you are fine but you have the occasional bad week or two don't demote yourself to 'dodgy'. Part of keeping stress in perspective and staying in control is to accept that inevitably there will be setbacks along the way and relatively short periods may be difficult and testing. It is the steady regressive trend, perhaps accumulating over several months, which should sound alarm bells.

I was impressed by the philosophy of a workshop delegate who likened her alarm system to her almost full bath. Both taps are left fully on but fortunately the plug is out, keeping the inflow and outflow in balance. She thrived on living her life close to the edge but knew that a significant increase in pressure would leave her flooded. She told us that at those times when everything was getting on top of her she would 'look for ways in her life to turn the taps down a bit'. At different times she had stood down from the PTA committee, delegated parts of a big project, negotiated a new set of deadlines with her boss, taken a long weekend break to give her some thinking time. She knew herself well, was honest with herself and valued the feeling of control in her life.

Two related observations to note here are (1) that *dodgy* is the most difficult state to self-assess and is habitually ignored and (2) that even low levels of stress, if unremitting, have a cumulative corrosive affect due to cortisol levels being permanently higher than they should be. Conversely, although a short burst of very high-level stress might really shake up our physiology for a while, we usually recover more quickly from that than we do from the more insidious continuity of ongoing lower-level stressful feelings day after day

5.2 Burnout

This alarming sounding word identifies a dramatic moment which invariably occurs without warning and is instant. It is nature's way of forcing us to stop before something more terminal might occur. Horrible though it obviously feels, it is therefore a valuable and essential event of self-preservation. Most people will know of a relation, colleague or friend who has experienced burnout. The victim probably didn't see it coming, but did anyone else? I would hope that no manager having read Part 2 of this book will miss the signs of impending burnout in a member of their team and be able to take steps to prevent it, as covered in Part 3.

Here are three typical examples of the circumstances of people I have supported with 'back-on-track' coaching, helping each to prepare for a return to work after three or four months away following burnout.

Person A arrived at work and parked his car in his usual place. He described to me his inability to turn off the ignition, convincing himself the key was stuck. He said he couldn't face going into work so he went home and slept for two days before visiting his GP.

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Person B was on his way to work, waiting at traffic lights for them to turn green. 'I suddenly realized I had tears in my eyes and couldn't see properly. I was frightened as I hadn't cried since I was a child.' He had the presence of mind to drive straight to his doctor's surgery.

Person C sobbed in a lay-by on realizing that she couldn't read any of the dials on her dashboard because they were all covered in post-it notes with reminders of all the things she had to do. She couldn't find a space for the latest one she had just written.

There are some interesting links in these three cases. All were shut in their cars, in their own world and not having to put on a brave face for anyone else. There is a tendency to 'play act' when we are with other people. Feeling we have to be cheerful and appear positive when we feel just the opposite can be completely draining and is often a prelude to the sudden moment when burnout occurs. Burnout is unlikely to occur before the individual has been struggling to cope with an accumulation of stress for about two years.

Other significant links are that all three said that they didn't see it coming and it took them by surprise, but colleagues could see that things were not right yet chose to say nothing to avoid embarrassment. As enlightenment about stress is expanding, hopefully the taboo factor is lessening and more people will get their heads out of the sand. Managers especially should acknowledge their duty of care responsibility in the matter and I hope Part 3 will provide valuable guidance.

5.3 Work-related stressors: self assessment

The simple questionnaire below can be completed in three or four minutes by simply ticking the 'Yes' or 'No' box. Where an answer could be either, perhaps due to altering circumstances, you should commit to just one or other on the basis of 'more often than not'. You then revisit the 'Nos' and ask yourself what are the chances of seeing any of them converted to a 'Yes' within six months and mark those accordingly. They represent the opportunity to turn a negative to a positive and can become a worthwhile specific goal. In a group session it can be a powerful experience to work in pairs on the results, encouraging each other to look for improvements and to challenge the 'Nos' which seem to be stuck.

With a typical group of twelve managers the total number of 'Nos' will average around eight with three or four identified as candidates for conversion. Extremes range from one to nineteen 'Nos' and all too often the boss/supervisor section collects a full set of 'Nos'. You may (or may not!) care to consider how your staff might rate you?

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	Yes	No
Workload		
1. Do you have about the right amount of work to do?	☐	☐
2. Can you normally complete your work and meet deadlines in the time available?	☐	☐
3. Can you take short breaks at work?	☐	☐
Feelings at work		
1. Do you feel that your work is worthwhile?	☐	☐
2. Do you feel that others value and appreciate your work?	☐	☐
3. Can you do your work the way you want to?	☐	☐
Workplace		
1. Do you have sufficient space to work in?	☐	☐
2. Is your workplace quiet enough?	☐	☐
3. Is your workplace conducive to the sort of work you have to do in it?	☐	☐
Manager/supervisor/boss		
1. Does your immediate boss help you when you need it?	☐	☐
2. Do they acknowledge it when you've done something well?	☐	☐
3. Do they give you constructive criticism about your work?	☐	☐
4. Do they review your workload with you on a regular basis?	☐	☐
5. Do they help you to do the job better?	☐	☐
Colleagues		
1. Do you enjoy working with most of your colleagues?	☐	☐
2. Do they help and support you when you need it?	☐	☐
Role within your organisation		
1. Are you clear about what is expected of you at work?	☐	☐
2. Are you free of any role conflicts?	☐	☐
3. Do most people you contact understand your job and accept the way you do it?	☐	☐
4. Do you have the right amount of responsibility for your skills?	☐	☐
5. Do you have the right skills for your responsibilities?	☐	☐
6. Do you have the opportunity to develop and improve your skills?	☐	☐
7. Do you have good promotion prospects?	☐	☐
8. Are you kept well informed and consulted about changes in your job?	☐	☐
9. Do you have the resources to do your job properly?	☐	☐
10. Are you paid fairly for the job?	☐	☐
Access to policies and procedures		
1. Do you have access to policies and procedures covering stress-related matters?		
2. Do you know where to go for confidential support if required?		

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6 Part II: Introduction Coping skills strategy

A successful strategy for dealing with our own stress should include a selection of techniques, with most emphasis placed on those areas where we feel improvement is most needed. There is a natural tendency in many of us to put most effort into what we have already mastered at the expense of those areas where we are weak. The seven elements of the strategy are as follows and with 1 and 2 already covered we shall now focus on 3 to 7.

1. A basic understanding of the causes and 'mechanics' of stress.
2. A good level of self-awareness and wanting to improve our coping skills.
3. An appreciation of the importance of effective management of our time.
4. Understanding the links between assertiveness and self-esteem.
5. Recognising the importance of a healthy lifestyle and work/home balance.
6. An understanding of relevant cognitive skills.
7. A grasp of the way emotional intelligence is linked to relationships.

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6.1 Time to spare? Seems unlikely but ….

On a managers' workshop I will ask them to identify from the following list of typical quotes the four they can most readily recognize in themselves. Overwhelmingly, the weighting of responses connects in some way to the poor management of time as indicated by the asterisks. We shall reflect on some of the other issues later.

1. I find it difficult to stand back and see the bigger picture
2. * I know I should delegate, but …
3. I don't know how to broach tricky subjects
4. Whatever I've done I think I should have done it better
5. I wake up in the early hours and can't get back to sleep
6. If I relax, I feel guilty
7. I'm sitting at home, but in my head I'm still at work
8. How can I tell if my staff are stressed?
9. * I find myself saying 'yes', when I should say 'no'
10. * I like to be involved in everything – I must know what's going on
11. I don't always realize what is happening to me
12. I worry that my own stress is rubbing off on my team
13. I suppose I need help, but I don't want to admit it
14. * I find myself trying to do too many things at once
15. * I should talk to my staff more but I don't have time
16. I'm not sure if I'm suffering from stress, perhaps it's just pressure
17. I worry my boss might think I can't cope
18. I think I'm my own worst enemy at times
19. * I never have time just for me
20. Sometimes I can't shake off my negative attitude
21. How do I get my staff to admit if they are struggling?

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6.2 Time management menu

Most managers say there are not enough hours in the day to get their job done properly. If by using one or more of the following you could successfully gain another 10% of time it would equate to an extra half-day a week or two days a month. That's usually achievable!

- Prioritize your daily, weekly, monthly work.
- Set 'SMART' goals. (Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timed.)
- Use your diary to make appointments with your tasks.
- Slice up large tasks.
- Incorporate some time to yourself in your diary and tell others to leave you alone
- Tackle one task at a time.
- Wherever possible, handle each piece of paper only once.
- Stand up to keep interruptions brief. Move chairs away!
- Take breaks (see more below).
- Hide away. Work at home.
- Prepare for and group outgoing telephone calls and e-mails. Keep them brief.
- Don't procrastinate – do it now!
- Allow time for the unexpected and for creative thinking.
- Prepare for meetings. Do you need to attend all of it? Published finish time?
- Look through your e-mails only twice, maybe three times, a day (see below).
- Learn to say 'no' (more later).
- When you can – delegate (see 6.4).

Question

If you could successfully implement them, which two of these techniques would make most difference to your working life?

It is easy to rubbish some items on the menu above as unworkable. Certainly the nature of your work will influence how 'do-able' some are, but let's examine just two which are often ignored for the wrong reasons and yet have scope to allow you to achieve more day after day. (1) The habit of regularly working through your lunch break is an act of folly and self deception. Many studies have shown that a proper break halfway through your working day results in you getting through more work by the end of the day than if you had worked right through. (2) E-mails may seem the life blood of your work but do they really need to be read as soon as they arrive? In some jobs perhaps they do, but not in most. The actual time lost in diverting our attention away from what we were doing to getting back to the level of concentration we have deserted in order to read an e-mail is far more than we imagine. Why not suppress whatever alerts you to an incoming e-mail for periods during the day? Just for a while you, not others, will be in control of your time!

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6.3 Tyranny of a 'to do' list

Of course it is essential to have in some form or other an ongoing "to do" list. Without it we would be rudderless, not to mention denying ourselves the quiet satisfaction of crossing items off from time to time. The trouble is that most "to do" lists are unachievable in the time scale we give them because we are unrealistic optimists, and then we go home at the end of the day feeling we've failed – again! For some unfathomable reason we are inclined to think we are superhuman and expect of ourselves levels of attainment which we would scoff at in others as being unachievable. My advice is to imagine that your best mate is looking over your shoulder at your list. If she or he is honest about it, might they be telling you to 'get real'?

Instead, try thinking more in terms of a really short *I-absolutely-must-do-these-today* list and start to zap it as soon as you arrive. Have another quite short *it-would-be-a-bonus-if-I-manage-to-make-a-start-on-some-of-these* list. Invariably you will go home having achieved at least as much as if your list had been the usual endless one. Your self-esteem will benefit too.

6.4 Delegation

The ability to get things done through effective delegation is the cornerstone of good self-management. It is not a quick fix but a shrewd long-term investment.

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Why delegate?

- To release time to concentrate on priority work
- To develop and motivate your people
- To make use of other people's specialist skills
- To do things quicker by concurrent activity

Why people don't delegate

- Unable or unwilling to let go
- Lack of faith in subordinates' abilities
- Fear that subordinates will perform better
- Believing you can do it quicker and better yourself
- Like to give impression of being overworked
- Enjoying doing the job – 'getting your hands dirty'
- Lack of training
- Difficult or aggressive subordinates
- No time to work out what the job entails

What to delegate

- Routine jobs, together with attendant responsibility and power to make decisions
- Whole jobs – to give a sense of achievement
- Jobs that others can do better and probably more cheaply

What not to delegate

- Accountability. It is part of your job you are delegating but you are still accountable
- New tasks without giving guidance or training
- Unpleasant tasks which are really your responsibility

How to delegate

Delegate early. When possible, plan your delegation well in advance and delegate early. Plan key dates, resources, people you need and any necessary training

- **Give a clear brief and gain agreement.** Ensure that all concerned understand exactly what is expected. Brief them clearly on objectives, resources and priorities
- **Agree review dates and stick to them.** With longer-term delegation it is essential to diarize review dates. Once delegated, the task is easy to forget about until it is too late.
- **Delegate whole jobs.** This not only gives a sense of achievement, it develops others and frees up more of your time.
- **Don't hover.** Be available for help when needed, but do not keep checking up on those to whom you have delegated.
- **On completion.** Accept what is good enough, do not 'nit pick'. Accept that the task may have been done differently from how you might have done it.

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7 Assertion as an antidote to stress

I find that in any group of managers there will be opposing views on the subject of assertion and their interpretation of it. Aggression gets confused in the mix of qualities and phrases such as 'always getting your own way at whatever cost'. Even different dictionaries provide variations on the theme and some incorporate words such as 'forceful' and 'insist'. Others use a softer interpretation and my favourite refers to 'feeling comfortable and in control of your dealings with other people' (there are links to emotional intelligence here which come up later). It may sound a bit lame but I like the idea of being 'nicely assertive' in the sense that properly practiced, it need not cause lasting offence or serious upset to others. Crucially, those who have this natural ability or have learnt to use it consistently are much less likely to experience personal stress than might a stereotypically aggressive or particularly passive personality, where in both cases low self-esteem may also be a key factor.

7.1 Be assertive with yourself

'I'm in charge of me!' The starting point for being assertive with other people is to be assertive with yourself. Decide what you want for yourself and how you will go about getting it. This mindset involves forming a blueprint in your head of the attitudes and behaviour you will always aspire to convey in any given situation. Once instilled, they become part of your way of thinking and instead of hesitating or rushing into a situation when you might be wondering what to do or say, your instinctive blueprint comes into play, you feel in control of your emotions and actions and you come across as confident and decisive. Of course it is not as easy or as automatic as I've made it sound, but even getting halfway there and progressing further in small increments can be rewarding.

7.2 A revealing exercise

I divide workshop participants in two groups and have them in separate rooms with a flip chart each. One group is asked to list the qualities of 'a good manager', the other lists the qualities of 'an assertive person'. The Good Manager list is compiled quite quickly, with little disagreement and the list is a long one. The Assertive Person list is much shorter and there is less unity during its compilation.

By bringing the two lists together side by side it can readily be seen that many of the qualities of the Good Manager could and should have appeared on the Assertive Person list. A clear implication has been effectively demonstrated that if you aspire to be a good manager, and by association less prone to stress, there is no better way than to take the 'nicely' assertive route. So what are some of the assertive qualities often missed but which appear on the Good Manager list?

Firm but Fair ~ Decisive ~ Clear in Communication ~ Confident ~ Good Listener ~ Consistent ~ Able to Stand up for Yourself … and Others ~ Able to seek Clarification ~ Able to Criticize Constructively ~ Able to Express your Feelings ~ Able to Change your Mind ~ Willing to be Flexible ~ Staying Calm and Composed

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7.3 The noisy library challenge

Imagine you need to do some urgent work in a public library on a Friday afternoon using reference books which cannot be taken away. You arrive at 3.00 pm and reckon on taking at least two hours to complete the research which your boss wants you to e-mail him before the end of the day. Imagine, too, that you are typical of many who simply cannot cope with extraneous noise when you are trying to concentrate. All is quiet when you arrive and the librarian is helpful in pointing out the books you will need before you settle down to the task. It's going well when suddenly the doors fly open and half a dozen teenage lads, some quite big, come crashing in and running around the bookshelves, making a non-stop racket. After a couple of minutes the librarian is still completely ignoring them and you, like some other library-users are becoming quite agitated. What do you do? There are several possibilities.

1. You could go to the librarian and ask him to intervene. This will probably work but he might say there is a new policy not to discourage youngsters from using the library by being in any way authoritarian towards them. This might lead to you arguing with the librarian and getting yourself in quite a state.
2. You could go direct to the kids and ask them to keep the noise down. Again it might work but it carries the possibility of them gathering around you and mocking you. How would that accelerate your stress levels?

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There is another way, far preferable to either of the above and in my interpretation of the word the most assertive course to take. Just go to the librarian and calmly and politely enquire if there is anywhere quieter you could work. Don't even mention the kids, because it's not necessary. The balance of probability is that the librarian will either go to reason with the kids or, assuming one exists, direct you to a room in the library where you can work in peace. Either way you have achieved what you wanted and most importantly avoided getting into a potentially stressful situation. You have stayed in control and remained focused on the job to be done. I've had managers on workshops saying they would go to the librarian and (stabbing their finger to demonstrate) would tell the librarian to 'Get off your **** and sort it out!'

The point of this somewhat unlikely tale is that to stay calm in challenging situations it is best to look before we leap and to recognize that we have choices as to how we react. Following our knee-jerk instincts and letting our emotions dictate our behaviour will in all probability leave us feeling stressed. The suggested approach to the noisy library problem may not on the face of it appear to be an assertive one. I would argue otherwise because it is all about you asking yourself the question, 'Who is in control of me?'

7.4 Just say 'No'!

For many the most testing aspect of assertiveness is the widespread difficulty of saying 'No' to someone. Of course it depends on who it is, your relationship, the nature of the request and the circumstances at the time. But it is all too easy to use any or several of these to convince yourself that you have no alternative to saying 'Yes'. If it is a friend, a colleague or a member of your family, you don't want to risk falling out with them or being judged as unhelpful. We like to be liked and to have the approval of others and there are very few for whom this is not a strong influence. Of course this is all very natural, but distinctly unhelpful at times. Even more challenging is the idea of saying 'No' to your boss, especially if there is a whiff of redundancies in the air! Heaven forbid!

There is no cure-all solution but there are techniques which are well tried and tested and I long ago lost count of how often I've been told, 'I used to have a problem saying "No" but not any more.' They had 'felt the fear but done it anyway.' They would report that it was nerve-racking the first time, a bit uneasy the next time, but after that it just became part of their armoury of protecting themselves from being taken for granted and helped them to feel more in control of their lives and especially of their time. It is not surprising that assertive people, especially those who are good at saying 'No', make better time managers than those who try hard to please everyone all the time. There is a close connection here.

Suppose a not particularly close friend has organized an evening get-together of old college chums every year for the past five years. It is always at the same pub, an hour's train journey away, has become predictable and rather tedious and several of those attending just want to talk about themselves and are dreary company. Decide in advance that you will not go to the next one. When she invites you, tell her not to be offended but that you will not be going this year as you've got a lot on your plate at the moment and are making a real effort to ration your time. When she protests, repeat what you've said but add that you hope they have a great evening. Don't appear too apologetic but instead lean towards being matter of fact. After all, it's no big deal!

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Saying 'No' to your boss requires a strong nerve and a bit of forethought! Imagine he appears at your desk at 4.30 one afternoon with a thick-looking report and tells you he'd like you to read through it, write any comments you want to make in the margins and leave it on his desk before you go home. At a glance it looks like at least an hour's work. You are already rushing to keep a promise to a colleague for some information she needs before you leave no later than 5.15. Any other day would be fine but it is parents' evening at your daughter's school, your wife is ill and cannot go and you've been given a strict timetable to see several teachers with your daughter. What do you do?

Your boss hadn't waited for a response because he's used to you doing what he wants without question. (Let's be honest, you are a bit of a 'yes person' and he's only come to you because he expects your usual acquiescence.) However, this time as he turns to retreat to his office you say, 'Hang on, Mark; I can't do that tonight.' He returns to your desk looking pained and says, 'What do you mean you can't? You repeat, 'I can't get that done before I go home.' His hands go on his hips and he says, 'Look. All I'm asking you to do is ...' You now say for the third time, 'I can't', adding: 'Normally I would, of course, but tonight I've got to be gone by ... parents' evening ...'

You've now told him three times, without apology, but crucially, you now offer a constructive alternative. After a quick flick through the report you say, 'I could get it back to you by 9.30 in the morning, would that be OK?' He reluctantly concedes but says 9.00 would be better. He likes the last word!

You should congratulate yourself for achieving more than you might imagine

a) you have displayed firm and fair assertion
b) you have stayed in control of your time management
c) you have honoured your undertaking to your colleague

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d) you have protected an aspect of your work/life balance
e) you have shown your boss that you can stand up for yourself and be constructive.

The last of these is a particularly interesting one. Your boss probably felt some brief annoyance that he wasn't getting just what he wanted, but he saw in you something of potential value which he'd not seen before. Ask yourself as manager of your team: would you prefer they were all 'yes people' or to have at least some who stand up for themselves? Which would you go to if you needed ideas or honest opinions?

7.5 Assertion miscellany

We've established that personality plays a large part in the practice of being assertive. So some of what follows will not suit everyone and a few may completely disagree with parts of it. Remember this is not an exact science, nor is it a matter of right or wrong. It's more about choice and how we might want to position ourselves to be in better control of our lives and adopt a more positive outlook.

Consider the company you keep and the contacts you have. You are probably stuck with most of them, but if you can take steps to distance yourself from any who are a drag, always negative, selfishly demanding of you or in any other way draining. Try to ration the contact and maybe in time drop them altogether. When you get the chance, spend time with those who make you feel good about yourself.

Saying sorry can be difficult and is easily evaded but just as often it is over-used when there's no need and it is noticeable that this tends to be from the lips of those who are short on confidence and self-esteem and therefore susceptible to stress. Imagine you arrive late for a training course due to an accident blocking the road on your journey. I would argue that the word 'Sorry' is less appropriate than 'My apologies'. 'Sorry' implies that you are at fault so why use it when you are not? More often than not we are putting ourselves down unnecessarily when we say sorry. Listen out amongst your colleagues and friends and decide for yourself if I'm right.

Reward yourself. Suppose you've been to hell and back on some project you are leading that has dragged on for months, giving you lots of grief along the way. At last it's over, you've signed off the final report and a great weight is lifted from your shoulders. Your boss is delighted with your efforts. Do something to celebrate or reward yourself. Go to the pub with someone whose company you enjoy or buy yourself that small picture you've been eyeing for a while. It will constantly remind you that you earned it. We are quick to put ourselves down, so why not give ourselves a discreet pat on the back when we deserve it?

Unfair criticism. You are at a large team meeting chaired by your boss. He picks on you unfairly for something which wasn't your fault and most of your colleagues know it. How do you deal with the situation assertively? Saying nothing is not a good idea, nor is starting to argue the point and risk showing your boss up in front of his team. Why not say something like, 'I'd really appreciate a brief private discussion with you about that after the meeting please.' The message is clear and you are in control. Don't let him get away with it and later indicate that you didn't want to mention it in front of the others 'but actually ...'

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8 Work/life balance

How many on their death bed are heard to whisper, ***'I wish I'd spent more time at work'?!***

If we were paid for the time we spent thinking about work, our employers couldn't afford us! You may enjoy being a workaholic and perhaps it doesn't impact on loved ones or friends, in which case no harm is done – or is it? If you are inclined to be obsessed with your work, the chances are that you are not seeing the wood for the trees and are missing opportunities for a more rounded outlook. But what if you have family or friends who deserve your time and attention? You may be physically with them, but the part of you that really matters might still be drifting off to work much of the time

A story I'm happy to tell against myself relates to the time when I saw myself as an up and coming young executive and some worry or other about my work would never be far from my mind. My wife was stuck at home with four young children and if I'd had a trying day and she happened to catch sight through the window of my hangdog expression as I approached the house, she would say to the kids, 'Keep out of his way tonight.' I'm not proud of that and wish I'd shown more interest in their lives at that time.

A senior manager I met was is in the habit of getting home in time to help get his children to bed and read them a story and then going back to work for a couple of hours most days. If he had been better at delegation he wouldn't have needed to do this and what message did it send to his large and capable team? I don't know how his wife felt about it but I do know it is not much fun for a family when the man (or woman) allows themselves to be shackled by their work.

8.1 Experiment with changes

Can you relate to any of the following? If so, select a few changes and experiment with moving towards a more balanced life. Even small steps can make a real difference.

Work/home interface. Could you spend less time at work, at least on certain days of the week? If you have to take work home, try excluding certain days of the week. Never take work home without the resolve to get it done that evening. It's fatal to take it thinking, 'I'll see how I feel.' You probably won't get it done and then you will feel guilty and your self-worth will have taken a knock.

What are weekends for? If you have used your weekend to really enhance your work/life balance in whatever way suits you, then early on Sunday evening you may experience the STB. The Sunday Teatime Blip is when the refreshing diversion of the weekend ends abruptly at the spectre of work in the morning. You are now at work in your head and your weekend break has ended prematurely. A good way to avoid this unhelpful state is to plan some activity or social get-together for the evening so that your mind is less likely to wander to work.

Contactable at home? Other than in really exceptional cases, is it really necessary? Perhaps you can't stop your boss, but what about your team? Are you that indispensable? Perhaps it makes you feel good? Perhaps they are just playing to your ego and letting you take decisions they should be taking themselves?

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Time management away from work. Are you happy with your time management outside work? Maybe it suits you to have no plan and just chill out for an evening or a weekend. Perhaps that's just what you need for once and it will do you good. But the law of reality dictates that you always have some household matters outstanding. You may be the sort who likes to deal with them before you can really relax or maybe you take the view that it can wait until you feel like it. Why do today something which can wait until tomorrow? All that matters is that you protect yourself from self-induced stress by arranging your time and responsibilities away from work in such a way that you don't feel bad about it.

Exercise, relaxation, diet, pride in your appearance and physical condition. It would be tedious and not appreciated if I laboured these issues on which so many magazines seem to thrive. In the context of this book, the only point to make is that all such things play a bigger part in one's wellbeing than is generally realized. The close relationship between stress and how you feel about yourself is obvious.

Holidays. Do you always take your full annual allocation? It is misguided not to do so.

Journey home. Allow yourself to be debriefing on the day up to a halfway landmark and then focus on what awaits you at home.

Get those clothes off! Change into something different as soon as you get home. To some it may seem of little consequence but it is good psychology. Home is home.

Leave a Friday evening list. On a Friday evening leave a brief list of the main things which will require your attention on the following Monday and then forget about them.

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8.2 'Me' time

Do you ever put yourself first, even if it risks seeming selfish? There is a particular issue here for women if the home is a typical family household. Even if you are managing to juggle your domestic life with a management job and career, you will naturally feel an instinctive wish to see that you are there for your children when they need you and that you are fulfilling the traditional expectations of motherhood in all its many facets, including later on the role of chauffeur to your teenagers! Unless you are blessed with the ready availability and support of a 'househusband', then life can seem like an endless rush to keep all the plates spinning. At times your loyalty to your employer and your family will be at odds.

It has become obvious to me in recent years that many women don't even consider asking other members of the family for help in sharing out some of the chores, feeling it would be an admission of failure on their part: 'Oh no, I couldn't possibly do that!' The irony of such misguided martyrdom, however understandable it may be, is that they can become overwhelmed with the pressure to the point of becoming ill and then feel they are letting down the family.

This may seem cock-eyed but the solution is to recognise that it can be selfish not to risk being perceived as selfish at times! Call a family conference, be assertive, tell them there are going to be some changes as you're not prepared to be a slave any longer and that to protect your health and stay fit (for their sakes) there is going to be more team participation around the house. Go further and let them know that at certain times you simply won't be available because you will be indulging in some 'me time'. It may be luxuriating in a bath with the door locked, going on a walk on your own, having a nap, getting lost in a book. The important thing is to be definite and precise about it so that everyone knows where they stand and what is expected of them. You'll get some initial mumbles of protest, but imagine the satisfaction when you overhear them admitting that you're right and they've always taken you for granted. Let them help you in drawing up the details of the new arrangements. It invariably works and you end up feeling less pressured and being more, not less, appreciated. Win-win!

Do you have a 'stability zone' you can retreat to? Some place where you feel you can really be yourself and don't have to make any effort for others. A classic example is the garden shed or workshop where a man can escape to his own kingdom! Such matters may seem of little consequence but they are important.

8.3 Interests outside work

Are you able to immerse yourself once a week or so for a few hours in some activity or interest which is so absorbing that there's no room for thoughts of work? On workshops I always write up a list of any of these mind-switching activities which delegates volunteer. The variety has been extraordinary including one macho-looking man who came up to me during the break and said he wasn't going to admit it in front of the others but his passion was needlework. Another, who had been quiet all morning, told us he was an international tug-of-war referee, after which we couldn't stop him!

Allied to this process of deliberate escapism is the practice of always having something down in your diary to look forward to. When that day has passed, book up the next event and keep them rolling, perhaps at least every quarter. All of this helps us keep a sense of balance and refreshes our aptitude to cope with our responsibilities more willingly and effectively.

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8.4 The impact of mood at home

We've all experienced how the mood of our boss (it might be you!) can have a significant impact day by day on the atmosphere and how the team feels, behaves and performs. But let's consider the consequences triggered by two extreme variations of your homecoming mood. The scenario when you leave for work in the morning is identical in both cases. It's the school holidays and you've been having a running battle with your teenage son about the state of his bedroom. Feeling irritable because you are running late, you call through his bedroom door as you leave, 'If your bedroom is not tidy when I get home tonight, I'm stopping your pocket money for a month.' You get an inaudible grunted response.

Result 1. You have a ghastly day with everything imaginable working against you and you leave feeling highly stressed. As soon as you get in your car to head for home you are gripping the steering wheel tight and racing along with the one thought: 'Right. That bedroom!' You don't stop to take your coat off but race upstairs and can hardly open the door for the clothes and more all over the floor. You go mad and everyone in the house steers clear of you. The family meal is eaten in silence and the atmosphere during the evening is like a heavy cloud.

Result 2. For once you have a dream of a day and leave feeling really good about yourself. At home you find your son watching a DVD and enquire if he's tidied his room. He says he plans to do so before he goes to bed. You tell him to make sure he does and go off happily to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Think about it!

8.5 Early hour waking

Many people experience the frustration of waking in the early hours and then find it difficult to get back to sleep. Around 3.00 a.m. seems the bewitching hour for most. There can be a host of possible reasons for this inconvenience which I shan't attempt to cover here, except for one. Managers report that what is most likely to be on their mind within a second of waking is worrying about some aspect of their work, usually a relationship difficulty or the daunting volume of work they have stacking up. The probability is that this has been on their mind, knowingly or not, as they've been getting off to sleep and that it has lodged there. They then hit a shallow period of sleep and their restless state of mind wakes them with the particular anxiety immediately to the fore. Your work/life balance is under assault and there appears no escape!

There are many variations of relaxation techniques, some so involved that you may end up more awake just by trying to remember the sequence! My advice is to keep it very simple. Lie on your back with your ankles uncrossed and your hands resting gently on your tummy. Focus on your breathing just below waist level and your hands should rise and fall. Gauge the speed of your breathing and slow it down slightly whilst making it as silent as you can. Say the word 'one' to yourself on each out breath for a while, which will help to steady the rhythm. Relax your jaw and your tongue, keeping your teeth apart.

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As it has probably been an anxious thought which woke you, try to supplant it by recalling some happy and relaxing event; maybe a particular day on holiday or a meal out with friends. Let it run through your mind as if you were watching a film of it and recall the sights and sounds as if you were back there. It requires a bit of practice but don't try too hard. It will work some nights but maybe not others. Turn on your side at some point if that is your preferred sleeping position. Sweet dreams!

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9 Cognitive skills

All the foregoing have the potential to help us feel more in control of our lives and therefore less vulnerable to stress. Some skills and techniques will suit different people in differing ways, depending on circumstances and personality. What is apposite for one may be inappropriate or unnecessary for another. However, there is a sphere of skill which eclipses the rest and which for most people is the key to leading a life where although some stress may arise occasionally, it is never allowed to last very long or to reach debilitating levels. For the fortunate it can form an inherent part of their 'take' on life and comes naturally. For others it can be the most significant underlying cause of their vulnerability to stress. Some explanation follows.

9.1 Irrational beliefs (non-religious)

Many people hold irrational and unrealistic beliefs which in extreme cases are blighting their lives. It seems to them that society is out of step and has got it all wrong! Although there is a lengthy and well-researched list of irrational beliefs I am selecting the three which I invariably find have the most clearly demonstrated connection to an individual's susceptibility to stress. They impact constantly on their attitude to themselves, to others and to the myriad of happenings and situations which fill and surround our lives. In short, they dictate our thinking and therefore our attitude, albeit in many cases unconsciously.

Irrational beliefs can also dictate our behaviour. We assume our behaviour springs from our emotions or feelings (anger, for example) and therefore it is what we should address. But we shall fail to deal with it properly unless we challenge and adapt the irrational belief which is at the start of the chain, for instance 'I must always be treated fairly…'

First irrational belief: I must always be approved of by everyone.
Second irrational belief: I must always be treated fairly and justly by everyone.
Third irrational belief: There is always a perfect solution to every problem.

The unyielding words may seem extreme but they represent the unconscious exaggeration going on in the mind and the constant reinforcement of the irrational belief.

9.2 Approval

When Jack is born he is the centre of attention, smiled at a lot, waited on hand and foot and his every need is attended to, probably with lots of cuddles along the way. Life is really rather good and he get used to being adored. He feels secure. Then at twelve months or so, something exciting but of life-changing significance occurs; Jack becomes mobile! Almost overnight the idea that he can do no wrong is turned upside down as he detects a change in tone of voice while approval gets mixed with spasmodic but increasing disapproval: 'Come away from there … Put that down … Don't touch … I've told you once ... No, Jack!'… and so on. Maybe you were told you were 'a naughty girl' when 'that was a naughty thing to do' would have been less potentially damaging.

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Jack wants to get back to the days of all-embracing approval and there starts a lifetime search for it. For some the effect is minimal, for others it can be overwhelming, especially if pushy parents are involved and even a disapproving glance can seem significant. The mother who longs for her daughter to be as interested in horses as she is. The father who hearing his son has got 11 straight 'A's and a 'B' comments jovially that it was a shame he hadn't got the full set of 'A's. He was probably immensely proud but couldn't stop himself, little realising how unhelpful he was being. All the son remembers is that he'd disappointed his Dad.

I'm sure we've all read articles written by famous people about their lives in which they refer to the huge influence of one or other of their parents and their strong need to please them. It crops up often in my 'back-on-track' coaching work.

So how do you deal with this demon of wanting everyone to approve of you? Tell yourself that it almost certainly originated from some aspect of your upbringing, that it is doesn't particularly matter what it was, that it is not unusual and that very few completely escape it. Above all, don't blame your parents but try to recognise that they were behaving towards you in what they felt was the right way at the time and might well have been following the lead set by their parents a generation earlier. Don't expect the suggestions above to provide a quick fix. Realistically it is better to loosen the roots of a belief you have held all your life than to assume complete removal. Work on the prospect of dilution rather than extinction of your belief by regularly telling yourself that it is totally unrealistic and that holding on to it is doing you no good.

9.3 'Fair and just'

A quick re-reading of 2.1 should suffice to put this in context. Wouldn't it be great if everyone always treated us fairly and justly. But life doesn't work that way and it helps to remind ourselves constantly of that simple fact. We, not others, are doing the beating up when we allow this irrational belief to take over our thinking. Allow yourself to be annoyed, hurt or disappointed, but rise above any stress because it does you no good.

9.4 Perfection

There is a problem here, namely that perfection doesn't exist! So perfectionists are always looking for something they will never find. Consequently they feel they have failed, egged on by the mocking terrorist in their head nagging them they are not good enough.

Throughout this book there are connections and cross-overs for the reader to discover and I only point out a few. One of these is the linking of perfection to time management.

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Let's say you are a serious perfectionist (also keen on approval!) and you have to write a quarterly report for the Directors, providing an update of some statistics together with some explanatory comments and recommendations. The statistics are readily accessible and take a few minutes to put together. You also manage to draft the supporting comments quite quickly and the whole thing is done in about fifteen minutes. A non-perfectionist would hit the send button and get on with other work, but not you! You want to really impress the Directors so you go over and over the script, changing the odd word here and there and fiddling with the layout. You eventually send it an hour later. There are two ironies here: first, your quick draft was completely adequate; and second, the Directors are really only interested in the statistics and can work out their own interpretation of them. They might skim-read the prose of which you are so proud or just not bother. You have wasted 45 minutes and this is not a one-off situation but something you do constantly, accumulating hours of lost time.

Perhaps as a proud housewife or househusband you are in the habit of dusting and vacuuming the house every week, including those two spare bedrooms which are never used these days. You like to do it all thoroughly just as you remember your Mum used to do when you were young. Nothing wrong with that perhaps, except that she didn't go out to work as you do nor was she constantly ferrying you and your sister all over the place. Now unless you happen to live close by a flour mill or cement works and leave the windows open, the chances are those two unused bedrooms simply don't need your attention every week. Why not gain yourself some extra time and only attend to them every other week? The house won't fall down, but you might if you don't re-appraise such aspects of your life.

'Goodenoughness' will not be found in any dictionary but I recently used it during a presentation to a senior management group ahead of a series of workshops for their managers. Their reaction was most telling and they latched onto it with some vigour, urging me to get the message across that their managers should be selective in deciding what really matters and that they shouldn't be afraid to cut corners on the myriad of less important stuff.

This general message is easily misunderstood and possibly even offensive to rank perfectionists who have always lived their lives by setting the highest standards in everything they do and are proud of it. But I am not advocating slapdash or sloppy standards. Certainly 'if a job is worth doing it is worth doing well' holds true and in some activities the pursuit of excellence is admirable. But in the highly pressured lives led by so many nowadays, and where the separation of work and home becomes increasingly blurred, something has to give. I suggest we need to start selectively questioning if a job needs doing in the first place and if so could not 'well' be supplanted by 'adequately', at least in certain cases? And if you really can't help striving to be the best, then at least give up striving to be perfect.

9.5 Perception and choice

Throughout the book there have been many suggestions, direct and implied, that we have far more choice than we might imagine as to how we interpret and feel about matters which might affect our resilience to stress and our sense of wellbeing. Given that choice of perception is always available to us, it is extraordinary that we so often fail to recognize it, blinded most typically by one or more of our embedded irrational beliefs. So set out below is a table of possibilities for us to attempt a deliberate switch away from our usual knee jerk feelings to something similar but significantly different and less restrictive. Note the intended outcome shown towards the end and have a go at the exercise, being sure to use some real situation and preferably one that is current.

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Unhealthy & Unhelpful		**Healthy & Helpful**
Anxiety	**becomes**	Concern
Depression	**becomes**	Sadness
Anger	**becomes**	Annoyance
Guilt	**becomes**	Sorrow
Hurt	**becomes**	Disappointment
Shame	**becomes**	Regret

Demands	**become**	Preferences
"I've got to … or he must …'		**"It would be good if …"**
Self-centred	**becomes**	Solution-centred

Try this exercise:

Think of a situation you feel anxious or worried about. Work out what irrational demand lies behind your anxiety. Now try to think in terms of concern rather than anxiety and switch the demand to a preference. Depending on the circumstances you should start to feel less self-centred (**'Poor me'**) and more solution-centred (**'This is what I'm going to do about it'**)

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9.6 Challenging negative thinking

It is inevitable that there will be times when a wave of negative thinking drags us down, especially when we are mentally exhausted. The skill is to prevent the harmful self talk from overwhelming us by not letting it persist too long. There is every chance that one or more of the following is pervading our thinking and it helps to identify the culprits and challenge them with a good dose of rationality.

- Am I jumping to conclusions?
- Am I assuming that my view of things is the only one possible?
- Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?
- Am I using ultimatum words in my thinking, like 'must', 'got to', etc.?
- Am I totally condemning myself (or someone else) on the basis of a single event?
- Am I expecting myself to be perfect?
- Am I over-estimating the chances of disaster?
- Am I exaggerating the importance of events?
- Am I fretting about how things should be, instead of accepting and dealing with them as they are?
- Am I assuming I cannot do anything about my situation?
- Is the outcome really going to be a catastrophe?

The fourth of these, concerning the use of language, is worth expanding. If we are under pressure and not handling things very well, we are quite likely to start using exaggerated and unyielding words, indicating that we are getting things out of proportion and making them seem worse than they really are.

Let's assume you have a lawn at home and it's your job to mow the grass. You arrive home on a Friday evening in June and announce as if your life depends on it, 'I must cut the grass this weekend!' Your partner says, 'Yes, it certainly needs it,' inadvertently adding to the pressure you've put on yourself. On Saturday afternoon you are getting the mower out of the shed when friends you've not seen for years turn up unexpectedly and stay not just for tea, but supper as well! The lawn cutting is now a double 'must' for tomorrow. At 6.00 a.m. you are woken by rain lashing on the window and it carries on right through Sunday. Your self-inflicted 'must' now has you feeling a failure. How much healthier it would have been on Friday evening if you'd said, 'I'll see if I can get the lawn cut this weekend.' Stated preferences are softer than demands and less likely to lead to stress. Also, a bit of exercise pushing the mower on Monday evening will do you good!

Once again we have had the opportunity of alternative thinking and of shifting our perception. To underline that we always have these choices, here is another simple but effective exercise in changing a negative monologue to something more constructive. Fill in your own example, current or historic, in the empty boxes.

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2 Example Situations	Negative mental monologue	Constructive alternative
Anticipation of arriving late for a meeting.	This is going to look so awful.	I may be late but it's not the end of the world.
Fear of giving a wedding speech.	They won't laugh at my jokes.	They will probably laugh at some of them.
Your example		

9.7 Overcoming anxiety

Most managers will admit that giving a presentation, especially to a large or important audience, is likely to make them nervous at best or extremely stressed. If their thinking beforehand is fettered by fear of failure, desperation for approval, aspirations of perfection and the rest, then they are making life unnecessarily difficult for themselves and are less likely to give an assured performance. Here are some useful tips.

1. Constantly remind yourself that you have been asked to do this because you are the expert on the subject and your audience are going to learn from you. For the fifteen minutes scheduled you will be the one in charge and they are lucky to have you!
2. If possible, visit the venue on your own a few days or even an hour or two beforehand. Stand on the dais and imagine the sea of faces in front of you. Get used to the idea of making that territory your own. If you are using any form of equipment, practise using it until it becomes second nature.
3. Familiarize yourself closely with what you are going to say, especially the start and the finish. Consider the tone you are going to use, the pace, the volume (always pitched for the back row).
4. Think through the things which might throw you but not in an 'Oh help, what if ...' way, but rather as a calm 'If this happens, this is how I'll deal with it' way. For instance it is possible you will be asked a question to which you don't know the answer. Don't let your face or voice betray for even a second any sense of panic or alarm. Immediately reply that you're grateful for the question, you don't know the answer but that if the questioner would like to give you their e-mail address before they leave, you will be glad to get them the answer within 24 hours. You may think you've let yourself down but your audience will be impressed by your calm and authoritative response.
5. Imagine the applause at the end and your boss congratulating you. Neither may happen but they are more likely to if you taken the idea on board.
6. How are you going to get there? You don't want to risk the hassle of driving hold-ups, so ask a colleague to take you and allow plenty of time.
7. Don't leave deciding what you are going to wear until you get up that morning. Make sure it's all ready the night before.

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8. Three or four minutes before the floor is yours, concentrate on breathing slowly and steadily from your stomach area rather than your chest. Crudely known as 'belly breathing', this technique will assist you physiologically to stay calm, which in turn will assist your mental state. Also, you are doing something positive and helpful, adding to the feeling that you are in control of you. Similarly, if something challenging occurs during your presentation, try to keep your breathing slow and from well below chest level.
9. Finally, it is easy to let all the build-up to the presentation dominate all your thoughts, as if no life exists beyond it. Suppose it is taking place on a Friday, spend some time during the previous few days thinking about and planning for the weekend which follows. This technique of looking beyond the worrying event helps to put it in perspective as just a part of life's continuum.

9.8 Talk support

Bottling up serious anxieties and concerns can make them seem worse than they really are and allowing them to fester over a period of time can be harmful to our confidence, self esteem and general feeling of wellbeing. It might even trigger some illness.

'A problem shared is a problem halved' – or more – and there is no substitute for talking your thoughts and feelings through with someone, as long as he or she is an appropriate person in whom to confide. The right time and the right place are important too. The ideal person will meet most of the following criteria:

+ Someone you trust

+ Someone who will listen carefully to what you say

+ Someone with whom you feel comfortable and reasonably relaxed

+ Someone with whom you can be honest and open about how you feel

+ Someone who will not make you feel foolish

+ Someone who makes you feel good about yourself

+ Someone who can see both sides of an argument

+ Someone who might bring a fresh or different perspective to a situation

+ Someone who really makes you stop and think

+ Someone who cares enough to give you their time and support

+ Someone who will be honest and constructive

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Choose your confidant carefully. Think through the gist of what you want to say but don't over-rehearse it. Wait and see where the discussion leads you before forming firm opinions or deciding on a course of action. Give yourself time to reflect. Maybe a follow-up discussion would be helpful.

If you choose your partner as your confidant, then it is preferable to avoid having such a discussion at home where you will be surrounded by the reminders of domesticity and probable distractions. Perhaps a long walk or a meal in a quiet corner of a pub where you stand a better chance of staying focussed.

It is interesting to reflect that we seem to be relatively good at somehow managing the upset of life's major setbacks such as redundancy, divorce or even the death of a loved one. I don't underestimate how devastating any of these can be or how long-lasting the effects. However, compared with hidden cumulative stress, they are less likely to lead to illness or burnout because they are in the public domain and the sufferer will hopefully have the benefit of a support network of family and friends to depend upon.

9.9 Self-affirming questions and slogans

Many people prefer not to delve too deeply into the psychology and 'mumbo jumbo' of stress but are looking instead for a few simple slogans, statements or questions to serve as quick-fix reminders of how they can help themselves. If you are inclined this way, then when you feel stress creeping up on you it may help to consider the likely cause and then select appropriately from this list. It attempts to distill many of the key messages suggested in this section 9.

Ask yourself...	Does it *really* matter?
	Is it *really* worth it?
	Who is doing the upsetting?
	Who is in charge of me?
	Am I *bound* to be stressed by this?
Tell yourself...	I have a *choice* not to get stressed.
	It is *unrealistic* for everyone to approve of me.
	It's *unrealistic* for life/people to always seem fair.
	It's OK to make a mistake.
	It's OK to change my mind.
	It's OK to say 'no'.
	It's OK to ask for help.
	It's OK to put myself first.
	Other people's standards/expectations can be *different* from mine.
	Perfection is *unattainable*
And finally...	Drop your shoulders and breathe low and slow

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10 Part III: Introduction The influence of the manager

As a manager you will know how the relationship with your own boss can affect how you feel about work and how it can influence your motivation. Working for a good manager can be inspiring and bring out the very best in you, but a bad one can leave you feeling undervalued and demoralized. Teams pick up the vibes of these relationships and are affected by them too, for better or worse.

The purpose of this final part of the book is to encourage you to think about your role and whether or not you are respected by your team for your leadership. If they happen to like you as a person, it is a bonus but by no means essential. Indeed, if you are motivated by a strong desire that you should be liked by them, then there will be times when this prevents you doing your job properly and you may be seen as weak.

In many cases a line manager will have been appointed not because they are seen as a good 'people person' but because they have appropriate length of service or experience of the technicalities of the work performed by their department. Unless they receive intense and early training in people skills, it can leave them in a vulnerable position which is unfair on them and the team they manage. A manager who has not had the right training, wanting to justify their appointment, will typically immerse themselves in what they are familiar with and be inclined to side-step any difficult people issues. Recently a manager told me she loved the 'nitty-gritty' of her job but found relationships with most of her team members very difficult. It seemed she didn't appreciate that her ability to lead the team effectively was the most important part of her job. She saw it more as a nuisance. If anyone reading this is similarly inclined, then you may find this section of the book quite challenging but I hope that as you work through it, you will want to select whatever aspects you feel are of most potential value to you and your team. If you decide to make changes, then start with something straightforward. Go for a quick and easy win to gain the confidence to progress further. Even something quite small can make a real difference.

10.1 Middle managers are the meat

This heading needs some explanation. It applies in two distinctly separate senses. In most medium to large organizations these days, the management structure is flatter than it used to be, with fewer levels of management. Typically there will be the Directors who have a few very senior managers reporting to them who in turn will each have up to eight middle managers under their wing. There may then be a few staff supervisors for some of the larger departments, but invariably it is the middle management layer which is the largest and which runs as a vital artery right through the organization. They are the meat in the middle of the sandwhich and they are the very meat of the organization. They are pressured from above and below and they collectively run the day-to-day operation. The directors and very senior managers could go missing for weeks with very little adverse impact, but the middle managers are in constant demand and keep things going.

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Because of this, it should be no surprise to learn that middle managers are significantly more vulnerable to stress than those above or below them. They are the ones who have to convey and implement changes and new initiatives while keeping the day-to-day activities operating effectively. Despite this, they often don't really feel in control of what's going on as they are so close to the coal face they might struggle to embrace the bigger picture and unlike the senior management they are usually not privy to plans for the future. Senior management can and should take their time in debating tomorrow, whereas the average middle manager is focused on just getting through the immediate needs of today.

10.2 Duty of care – just another initiative?

I'm mindful that much of what follows in Part 3 might initially appear to some middle managers to add to their existing pressures. I can but hope that after reflecting on relevant selections in Parts 1 and 2, you will want to re-appraise your role, asking yourself if you can undertake less 'hack' work yourself and consider sharing more with your team and letting them see you trust them. Those of you who like to have a finger in every pie and to know what's going on all over the place will not find it easy at first. However, even moderate success will be a liberating experience as long as you don't then worry about it and fall back into the habit of checking up on everything! The risks associated with intelligent 'letting go' are nothing compared to the sense of satisfaction it can bring to you and the relief to your team and those outside your working life.

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From a legal perspective the directors of an organization are the ones accountable for 'duty of care' towards those they employ. Normally they are so far removed from day to day matters that they themselves cannot realistically assess the state of play amongst middle managers, supervisors and staff. Furthermore, they may not be getting an accurate picture from their few senior managers as to how those further down the line are coping. So behind the plea for your self-preservation covered in the previous paragraph lies the twist in the tail for managers to find the time and inclination to take responsibility for day-to-day duty of care towards those they manage. Only by standing back a little will you be able to properly observe and sense how individuals in your team are faring. This is nothing like as onerous as it may appear and certainly need not involve complex and lengthy measurement and assessment or the formalities too often associated with them. My philosophy is simple: all line managers should adopt their own means of knowing whether or not each individual reporting to them is 'OK' as an ongoing and natural part of their job. If they sense there is a problem, they should address it appropriately. I hope the pages which follow will give you the confidence to take this in your stride.

10.3 Manager's duty of care check list

As a matter of course regularly review in your mind the four rooms described in 5.1 and imagine where each member of your team seems to be situated.

The ongoing questions every line manager needs to be able to answer for every reportee are: ***Does it seem likely that this individual is currently vulnerable to or already experiencing stress at a level which might make them ill or prevent them from doing their job with confidence and satisfaction? If so, what can I do to help?***

It is preferable not to just ask the question in very general terms as it is too easy for it to be misunderstood or dismissed with a sweeping or vague response. The following subject areas are more likely to lead to discussion of the particular and to throw up work-related specifics which can be addressed.

1. **Workload:** manageable volume? manageable deadlines? tolerable intensity?
2. **Working environment**: safe? heat? light? space? noise?
3. **Resources:** people? equipment? systems? procedures?
4. **Breaks from work**: allowances taken? away from workstation?
5. **Conflicts of interest:** competing demands? conflicting priorities?
6. **Variety and flexibility:** choice of way work done? sequence? priorities? pace?
7. **Supervision:** too much? not enough?
8. **Training:** sufficient for confident and competent performance?
9. **Feedback:** acknowledgement ? constructive criticism? help with improvements?
10. **Support from manager and others:** interest in ideas? help over difficulties?
11. **Harassment**: bullying? abuse? hostility?
12. **Changes:** consulted? listened to? properly communicated?
13. **Work/life balance:** tolerable hours? take work home? contacted at home?
14. **Non work-related issues**

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Mood and performance at work are easily affected by anxieties outside work and therefore might be more difficult to raise with the individual. Nevertheless duty of care requires each manager to have sufficient general awareness of the individual's circumstances away from work to be able to be understanding and supportive when the need arises.

10.4 Detecting possible signs of stress in others

Keep a look out for changes to previous norms or expectations. This list will help, but should be viewed as possible indications and not proof of anyone's stress. Other appropriate and tactful means should be used to establish if there is a problem, as described later.

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Demeanour/manner/mood
Nervous, shifty
Quiet, withdrawn, detached
Over talkative
Apologetic

Body language/physical
Avoidance of eye contact,
Fidgety, always moving
Scratching, rubbing
Twitching
Playing with hair, beard
Nail biting
Grinding teeth, jaw clenching
Fiddling (paper clip)
Smoking pen
Deep inhale/sigh

Attitude
Negative
Defensive
Rejection of criticism
Blaming, complaining
Cynical, sarcastic
Disinterested/ostrich
Them and us
Obsessive, blinkered
Inconsistent, erratic
Demanding
Disinterest

Behaviour
Aggressive/submissive
Phone slamming
Keyboard bashing
Disappearances
Fast eating
Busy sick
Whistling
Staying late
Walking away
Hovering

Speech
Mumbling
Loud/soft voice
Stammering
Spoonerisms ("par cark")
Fast/ponderous
"Catastrophising"
Exaggeration

Appearance
Untidy, unkempt
Skin problems
Weight changes
Bags under the eyes
Sweating

Performance
Careless, unpredictable
Missed deadlines
Poor quality
Forgetful
Timekeeping
Poor communication
Indecisive

Dependence on
Others, assurance
Nicotine
Alcohol
Caffeine
Chocs/sweets/cakes

Miscellaneous
Misunderstandings
Inappropriate humour
False jollity
Pathetic excuses
Avoidance
Chaotic desk
Tears
Illness absence
Private phone calls
Hints about private life
Rivalry
Not taking holidays

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10.5 How to deal with George

George has worked for you for several years and is a reliable member of your team. Quite recently you've noticed he seems distracted and forgetful and twice at team meetings he has been uncharacteristically aggressive in his tone to you and his colleagues. Neither rush nor delay your investigation. If George has a particularly close mate in the team, you may decide that a discreet low-key enquiry with Pete, whom you trust, is appropriate and at best you may discover it is some temporary difficulty at home which is now sorting itself out. Resist the temptation to be nosey! What matters here is that you have done something and that the situation appears not to warrant any further intervention from you. To seal the matter you might ask Pete to give you the nod once all is well and this he does a few days later. You've fulfilled your duty of care and managed to avoid any embarrassment or confrontation with George. As an incidental bonus you have probably impressed Pete and perhaps flattered him too by asking for his help.

But what if George has no close mate? Think through how best to raise the matter with him. If it was you, how would you like your boss to deal with it? Think through your general approach in your mind, but don't over-rehearse exactly what you plan to say. Just as importantly, anticipate a range of possible reactions you might get from George and decide how you would deal with each (similarities of principle here to the library quandary and preparing for your presentation scenarios). Look for an early opportunity to speak with him when nobody else is around. Don't beat about the bush but initially simply ask him if he is OK. Be ready for him to be defensive: 'Yes, I'm fine. Why are you asking?' You then need to tell him very directly and in as few words as possible what you have noticed about his recent change of behaviour, perhaps adding that you know him well enough to be sure that something is bothering him, hence your enquiry. You may get the same non-specific response as Pete's and the same result ensues. Again you've done your job properly and shown that you care.

Now let's suppose that George seems relieved by your enquiry but is obviously holding back some pent-up emotion. Ask him if he he'd like to talk about it. If he says he does, then you are likely to find yourself in an unofficial counselling role. This is often seen as a potentially daunting situation for the manager unless she or he has had some basic training in counseling skills. But it is not as difficult as it might seem, not least because your main role is to sit quietly and listen calmly to whatever George wants to talk about. The following guidelines should be helpful.

10.6 Basic counselling skills for managers

From time to time a member of your staff, or a colleague, may ask for a 'quiet word' in order to share a difficult problem or worry. It may be a sensitive work-related issue or something to do with their life outside work. It has probably taken some courage for them to approach you and they may be feeling nervous or emotional .

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This is an important part of a manager's job, but it is often evaded, because of a feeling that it is only for qualified experts. Here are some straightforward guidelines:

1. Put yourself in their shoes. How would you like to be treated?
2. Judge how much of your time it might take. If possible deal with it immediately or..
3. Agree a time when you are least likely to be interrupted.
4. Agree a place. If it's your office, don't sit behind your desk.
5. 95% of your task is to listen. Don't talk about yourself.
6. Stay relaxed, but show by your body language, facial expression and tone of voice that you are interested and concerned for them.
7. Show understanding and empathy from time to time in whatever way seems appropriate.
8. Don't be embarrassed by silences. Let them set the pace.
9. Don't be embarrassed by their emotion. Have available a box of tissues.
10. Ask for clarification on any points if it seems necessary.
11. Very briefly summarize your understanding of the situation using phrases like *'It sounds as if ...', 'From what you say it seems as if …'*
12. Ask if there is anything practical you can do to help.
13. It may be appropriate for them to see someone else. Be aware of the options and discuss them if necessary.
14. Agree on some form of follow-up (if they want it) and keep in touch.

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CONFIDENTIALITY

As a manager you cannot give a guarantee of complete confidentiality until you know what the matter is about. Look for an opportunity to raise the issue at the earliest point so that there is an understanding between you of the extent of confidentiality. You will give and confirm it again at the end of the session.

10.7 If in doubt……Do!

If you have a hunch that a member of your team is struggling and vulnerable to the possibility of serious stress, back your instinct and check it out at an early stage. It is much better to do that and find it not to be the case, or easily solvable, than to do nothing and later regret it when the member of staff is off sick, perhaps for a long time, with a stress-related problem. Never be afraid of misreading the signs and being found to be wrong. Rather feel relieved!

Similarly, if you are unsure how to address a personnel problem, don't hesitate to enlist the expertise of your HR department and keep your manager in the picture, too. Having duty of care responsibility for those you manage does not mean that you will deal with everything on your own. Indeed, I've come across many cases where the line manager has actually been the problem and it is necessary for them to take a back seat.

10.8 Influence of type 'A' personality

A person who is caught up in the three irrational beliefs listed at 9.1 is likely to be prone to anxiety (hence 'A') and is likely, knowingly or not, to be a stress spreader. But before considering the downsides this can bring, we should acknowledge what type 'A's have to offer and the contribution they make. Typically they are hard-working, driven, ambitious, set high standards, make things happen and get things done. Every organization needs such people and it is not surprising many become managers

It is too easy to exaggerate the characteristics of a typical type 'A' individual and anyway the severity and range of such characteristics will vary from one to another. But the tie-up with their own vulnerability to stress and the effect they can have on others is central in most organizations and departments. If you work for a type 'A' boss you will readily recognize what follows. A question worth tentatively considering is whether or not those who work for you might feel the same!

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A particularly strong type 'A' person will always be on the go and will struggle with the very idea of relaxation. Because they feel the need to be in control and don't quite trust anyone else to do anything as properly as they would, they find it hard to resist checking up on the actions of others. If a button needs pressing to summon a lift or at a pedestrian crossing they will need to press it themselves even though they have already seen someone else do so. For them there is only one way to load a dishwasher and only one way for a toilet roll to hang on its holder! They are black and white in their thinking and can't accept grey. They struggle with uncertainty and want things cut and dried.

They are impatient by nature and time is their enemy. At the checkout queues in a supermarket they will be constantly on the lookout for a queue moving quicker than theirs with a view to switching to it. On a motorway holdup with one lane creeping forward, then another, they will be switching again, trying always to be on the move. In conversation with someone who is inclined to pause to summon the right word they will leap in to provide it. They are not good listeners as their mind is on fast forward to their own agenda. Socially they will ask questions but not take in the answers. In extreme cases they might be 'hurry sick', eating, talking and walking fast.

They are eagle-eyed and fussy by nature and will pick up on minor spelling mistakes or errors of grammar, perhaps in an e-mail where it doesn't really matter. They will get caught up in the trivia, often at the expense of seeing the bigger picture. As for pictures, they will not only notice a slightly crooked one on the wall in someone's house or office but feel compelled, given the chance to, to straighten it!

They are unrealistic in judging how long a job will take and consequently overload themselves as they agree to more and more. They say 'yes' without thinking. There is one rule for them, another for everyone else and they will stubbornly resist offers of help, feeling it to be a sign of weakness. They will often leave the starting of a major task close to the deadline for its completion, waiting for the mood and conditions to feel just right and convincing themselves that they do their best work under self-imposed time pressure.

They will tend to 'catastrophize' their language, inaccurately using words or phrases such as 'must', 'got to' and 'absolutely essential'. Something which is no more than inconvenient will be described as appalling or dreadful. They are not geared to thinking in terms of preferences.

All this may seem extraordinary to some readers but it is my guess that most will have come across those who fit the pattern or at least parts of it. It has its comical side and you can now indulge in the fascinating sport of type 'A' spotting! But more seriously there is well researched and indisputable proof that strong type 'A' individuals are far more susceptible to coronary problems than those at the other end of the scale, who are more laid back and conveniently dubbed type 'B'. It is no surprise that 2 type 'A's living or working together is unlikely to make for a happy ship, whereas a type 'A' alongside a tolerant type 'B' can work well.

It is often the case that type 'A's will complain about the antics of other type 'A's without recognizing similar traits in themselves! As readers you are likely to be assessing where you fit in. If you conclude that you have clear leanings in the type 'A' direction my advice is that you don't get uptight about it, but accept that you are who you are, try to understand what makes you so, feel no guilt or inadequacy about it but look for ways to manage the downsides for your own sake and those around you. Also, remind yourself that a self-controlled type 'A' is a valuable and essential contributor to his or her organization.

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10.9 Am I a stress spreader?

If you feel it is relevant for you to consider managing your team in a less frenetic and more trusting fashion, then the following short list (compiled from workshop delegates' own admissions) might be thought-provoking and you may want to add a few more.

1. 'I don't give enough time to them or listen to them properly.'
2. 'I tend to be dismissive in showing concern for their anxieties.'
3. 'I expect them to do everything my way.'
4. 'I arrange meetings thoughtlessly.'
5. 'I probably don't hide that I have favourites and others I don't rate.'
6. 'I seldom give thanks or show appreciation.'
7. 'I make unrealistic demands and assume they can cope.'
8. 'I let my own stress show and must seem concerned only with my problems.'
9. 'I have difficulty delegating without then hovering and checking up.'
10. 'I don't really understand their job but pretend I do.'
11. 'I don't encourage their initiative or ask for their ideas.'
12. 'I'm inconsistent in temperament. They don't know what to expect.'

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10.10 Emotional intelligence

Known as EQ, this should not be confused with IQ, not least because there is a tendency for those with high IQ to be weak on EQ. It is too broad a subject to cover fully here so I shall comment on just one aspect, namely the treating of others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and use two extreme examples to demonstrate a lack of EQ.

I was asked to work with a small team of scientists to examine the team's low morale which had existed for some while. Amongst a variety of evidence it came to light that the mother of a team member had died very suddenly, resulting in a few days compassionate leave. On the day the bereaved woman had needed to rush off home, the team manager was away. He made no contact with her during her absence, which maybe was understandable, but on her return to work he made no reference to her loss whatsoever and treated her as if she'd not been away at all. When I queried this with him, he said he was embarrassed and didn't know what say so had decided to ignore it. Such failures don't just affect the person most involved but rub off on all the team.

The other example involved a woman who had been recruited externally to set up a new high-profile initiative involving painstaking research and then appointing a small team to get the initiative underway. Her boss, who was 'a nice enough bloke', had emphasized the importance of the job at the interview and how important its success was to the organization. He was responsible for her appointment and although they worked in adjoining offices, he left her alone to do the job how she felt best. She was not the type to be asking him how she was doing all the time, but after six months of no feedback whatsoever from him she decided to ask if he was happy with how it was all coming together. He seemed surprised to be asked and said it seemed fine, adding that she'd be the first to hear if he wasn't happy. Not unfriendly in tone, but no thanks or encouraging 'well done'.

Both examples indicate a woeful lack of imagination from the manager and seemingly a blind spot in recognizing that how you make someone feel is so important. As previously indicated, maybe one should have some sympathy that they were either an inappropriate appointment in the first place or that they received no training in people skills or the basics of team leadership

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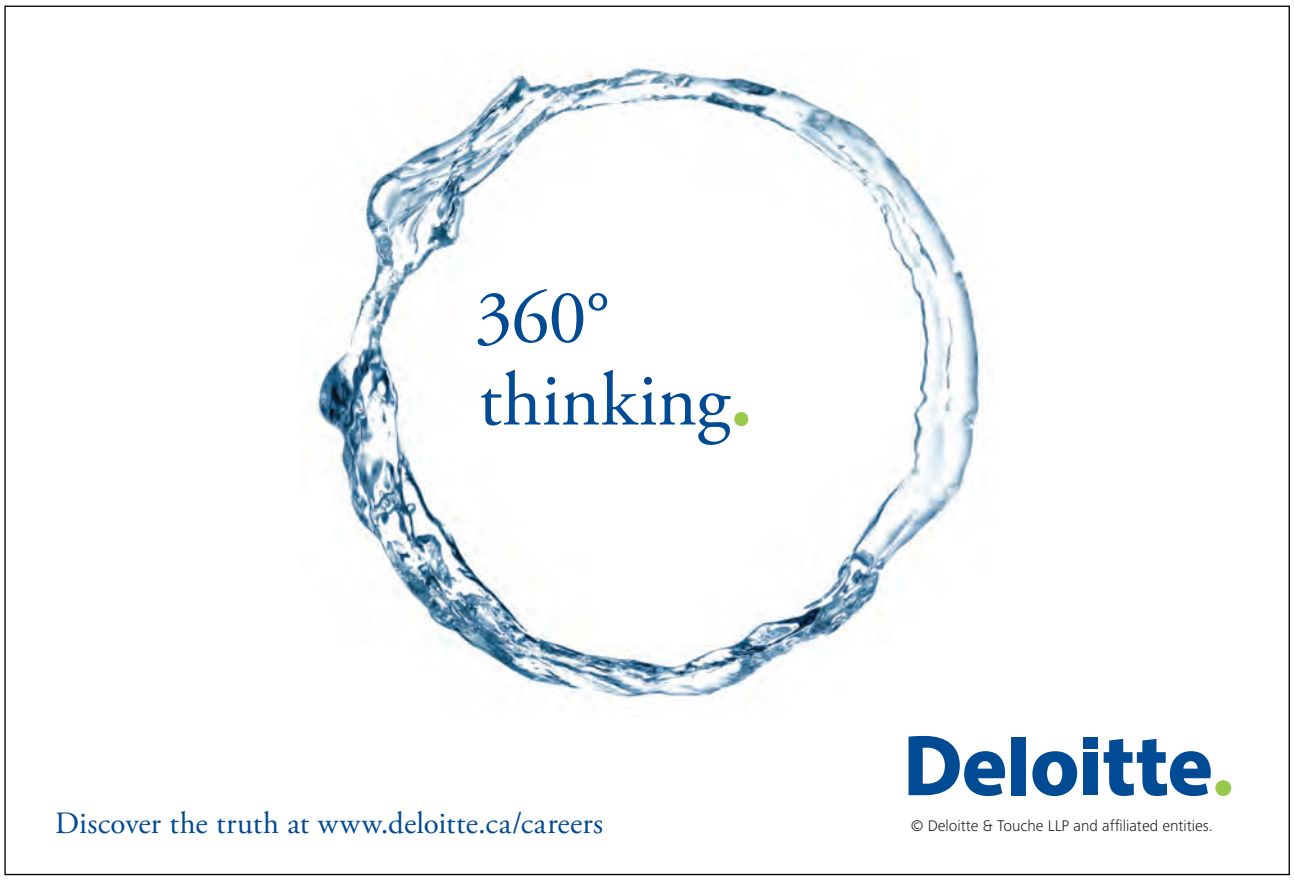
11 Conclusion

I'm mindful that there is a wide range and mix of material here and I hope you have found it possible to focus most on that which is relevant to you. Please remember, though, that if you head up a team the chances are that, between them, all of it will have relevance in some sphere or other.

Above all I hope that you will want to experiment selectively and experience the satisfaction of discovering that even a small change can have disproportionately large benefits and make you feel more in control of your life. Take it slowly and look for opportunities to build gradually on your successes. Share your thoughts and experiences with a helpful colleague and where appropriate with your team as well. Set some realistic goals and look for opportunities for mutual support in achieving them. Good luck!

Finally, there is nothing in this book which should be interpreted as soft management. Today as never before managers have every right to expect loyalty, dedication and hard work from each member of their team. But it needs to be deserved and that is more likely to come about if you adopt a firm but fair and caring approach and by showing everyone that you are in control of you.



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